

'Billionaires' Row': inside Hampstead palaces left empty for decades

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

1. Write the number *one billion* in digits.
2. Where in the world would you buy a mansion if you were a billionaire?
3. What architectural features would you expect a billionaire's home to have? And what would you expect to find in it?

2 Key words

Match key words from the text to the definitions. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. the parts of a building that remain after it has been severely damaged _____
(para 1)
2. broken pieces of stone and brick from buildings, walls etc that have been destroyed
_____ (para 2)
3. completely empty with no people _____ (para 3)
4. admired and respected by people _____ (para 3)
5. the process of owning houses in which you buy a small home first and then buy a bigger or more expensive home when you have enough money _____ (para 3, two words)
6. empty, not used and in a bad condition _____ (para 4)
7. a rich and powerful person who is involved in business or industry _____
(para 5)
8. making you feel extremely annoyed and impatient _____ (para 6)
9. used to describe water that is unclean _____ (para 8)
10. an important and powerful person in a particular activity or industry _____
(para 10)
11. buildings that are in a bad condition and need a lot of work _____ (para 12)
12. a term used to describe the extreme shortage of affordable homes _____
(para 16, two words)
13. an elected member of the authority that governs a city, county etc _____
(para 16)
14. so expensive that it prevents people from buying it _____ (para 16)

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On The Bishops Avenue, houses worth tens of millions of pounds lie derelict in a spectacular example of waste

Robert Booth
31 January, 2014

- 1 A thick crust of bird droppings is piled on the gilded balustrade of one of Britain's most expensive properties. Pigeon skeletons lie among shattered mirrors and water streams through broken cornicing. This is The Towers, a £30m palace in "Billionaires' Row" in north London, whose spectacular ruin has been kept secret until now.
- 2 It is one of ten mansions in the middle of The Bishops Avenue – the heart of London's spiralling property market – that have stood almost entirely vacant since they were bought a quarter of a century ago, it is believed on behalf of members of the Saudi Arabian royal family. Their Grecian columns are cracking into pieces and mosaic-tiled swimming pools are filled with rubble. Nature has taken over to the extent that owls have moved in.
- 3 It is a desolate scene repeated up and down the supposedly prestigious avenue that Lloyds Bank has calculated is the second most expensive street in Britain. While more and more people struggle to get on to London's property ladder as house prices rise at 11.2% a year, 16 mansions on the most expensive stretch of The Bishops Avenue are sitting empty, many behind padlocked gates, with their windows shuttered with steel grilles and overgrown grounds patrolled by guard dogs.
- 4 Across the street stands another derelict mansion, worth £18m, with smashed windows and walls coated in anti-climb paint. Metal grilles block the windows of another, which has been sold for £20m.
- 5 But that doesn't stop the prices going up. Dryades, a mansion until recently owned by a Pakistani politician, sold for £12m in 2007 and is believed to be worth about £30m today. Heath Lodge, the scene of the 1984 murder, by silver bullet, of fashion tycoon Aristos Constantinou, is worth £13m today, after having been sold in the late 1970s for £400,000.
- 6 The dereliction can be agonizing for people struggling to keep a roof above their heads in one of the world's most expensive cities. One security guard working on the avenue said it was exasperating to see so many tens of thousands of square feet of property – enough to house dozens of people – falling apart.
- 7 Royals flushed with oil wealth from Nigeria and Saudi Arabia were among the first to come to this curving road near Hampstead Heath. Iranians fled here after the fall of the shah. Now, Chinese house hunters are following Russians and Kazakhs who have spent millions securing an address estate agents tell them is as world famous as the Champs Elysées and Rodeo Drive. Recently, two mansions have been on sale for £65m and £38m, promising endless Italian marble, leather-padded lifts and luxury panic rooms.
- 8 However, in the grounds of the empty mansions, stone fountains crumble and lawns have become bogs. Inside one, water drips through a huge crystal chandelier onto a thick carpet rotting under sections of collapsed ceiling. Moss grows through shattered bricks and mirrored tiles are scattered across a bathroom. The swimming pool is filled with a foot of brackish water and has flowers growing through its tiles. Wooden slats bulge away from the sauna.
- 9 But it is the wreck of The Towers, a grand mansion set among acres of hornbeams, oaks and limes, that is most dramatic, with its huge, high-ceiling halls occupied by pigeons and its walls turned bright green by algae as water pours through three storeys and plinks into a vast, empty, basement swimming pool. Unopened wooden crates marked "bullet-proof glass" reveal the security fears of the previous owners.
- 10 Today, very few people live on The Bishops Avenue full time. A security guard patrolling the pavement outside one mansion said that the owners were not there. Another, outside Royal Mansion, declined to say if anyone was home, while a member of staff at another mansion simply warned the *Guardian* about

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the guard dogs. Magdy Adib Ishak-Hannah, an Egyptian-born private healthcare mogul, whose personal wealth is £45m, said he was in the minority of permanent residents.

11 "It's not a neighbourly place, where you can chat over the fence," he said. "To be honest, I have never seen what my neighbours look like. Next door, a Saudi princess spent £35m on a new house and I've never seen her. There are about three houses that are lived in 24/7 and half of the properties are occupied three to six months a year. The other half, who knows if they come or not?"

12 The multimillion-pound wrecks are evidence of a property culture in which the world's richest people see British property as investments. One Hyde Park, a block of apartments in Knightsbridge, is another example where more than half the flats are registered with the council as empty or second homes.

13 Nevertheless, the talk on the avenue is about building £5m apartments, instead of £50m mansions, in an effort to draw people back.

14 Anil Varma, a local property developer, has decided to rebuild one of the most valuable sites on the avenue as a collection of 20 apartments with a concierge, maid service, 25-metre pool, spa and cinema.

15 "If you build a big house and try and sell for £30m to £40m, it won't sell," he said. "Locals won't buy and so you have to bring in overseas buyers."

16 But the prospect of the avenue's empty property being used to help solve the housing crisis remains distant. Andrew Harper, a local Conservative councillor, laughed when asked whether some of the derelict housing could become affordable homes. He said the land price would be prohibitive.

17 "Very wealthy people own property there," he said. "Sometimes they live in them and sometimes they don't."

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3 What do you remember?

Answer the questions below. Then check your answers in the text.

1. What is the name of the street? Where is it (area, city, country)?
2. Which two other exclusive streets is it compared to?
3. Who owns The Towers? Who or what lives there now?
4. Two mansions on the street have recently been up for sale – how much for?
5. What does street resident Magdy Adib Ishak-Hannah say about his next-door neighbour?
6. What does he say about the occupancy of the other mansions?
7. What do we know about the origins of the owners of other properties on the street?
8. How does the security guard feel and why?
9. What ideas does a local property developer have for one of the sites on the street?
10. What does the local councillor say about the street and London's housing crisis?

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4 Luxury

Find all the words and collocations in the text that describe the mansions' expensive, exclusive features. For example, *mosaic-tiled swimming pool*.

5 Negative descriptive words

a. Reorder the letters to make words. Write the words into the gaps to make collocations from the text.

1. TESHATDER	_____	mirrors
2. ORNKBE	_____	cornicing
3. REROGVONW	_____	grounds
4. CDTREELI	_____	mansion
5. DESMHSA	_____	windows
6. DHASTERTE	_____	bricks
7. PLSLADCOE	_____	ceiling
8. ARKCBHIS	_____	water

b. Go to www.theguardian.com/business/gallery/2014/jan/31/bishops-avenue-derelict-mansions-in-pictures. Look carefully at the photographs. Can you see any of the things mentioned above?

6 Webquest

Watch the video report that accompanies this article on www.theguardian.com/money/2014/jan/31/billionaires-row-hampstead-palaces-empty-london-property. Which of the words that you read in the article can you hear spoken in the video?

Find The Bishops Avenue on Google Maps. Access the street-view function to take a close look at the properties.

The Bishops Avenue is referred to as the second most expensive street in Britain. Which is the most expensive?

7 Discussion

- Do you see property as a means of investment or simply as a place to live?
- What are the most exclusive streets or areas in your country or city? Who lives there?

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KEY

1 Warmer

- 1,000,000,000

2 Key words

- ruin
- rubble
- desolate
- prestigious
- property ladder
- derelict
- tycoon
- exasperating
- brackish
- mogul
- wrecks
- housing crisis
- councillor
- prohibitive

3 What do you remember?

- The Bishops Avenue; in Hampstead, north London
- Rodeo Drive (Beverly Hills, California) and the Champs Elysées (Paris)
- members of the Saudi Arabian royal family; owls
- £65m and £38m
- She is a Saudi princess who spent £35m on the house, but he has never seen her.
- He says there are three houses that are lived in 24/7, half the properties are occupied three to six months a year and he doesn't know about the rest.
- The first were members of the royal families of Saudi Arabia and Nigeria. Then came Iranians, Russians and Kazakhs. Now, the Chinese are following them to The Bishops Avenue.
- He feels exasperated when he sees property that could house dozens of people falling apart.
- He wants to turn one of the sites into a block of 20 luxury apartments.
- He said that the derelict properties will not become affordable homes because the price of the land is too high.

4 Luxury

Grecian columns, gates, Italian marble, leather-padded lifts, luxury panic rooms, stone fountains, huge crystal chandelier, thick carpet, mirrored tiles, sauna, acres of trees, huge, high-ceiling halls, bullet-proof glass, guard dogs, security guard, concierge, maid service, spa, cinema, 25-metre pool

5 Negative descriptive words

a.

- shattered
- broken
- overgrown
- derelict
- smashed
- shattered
- collapsed
- brackish

6 Webquest

Teacher's note: What is referred to as the most expensive street in the UK may differ depending on what sources the students use. The most likely at the time of writing is Egerton Crescent in South Kensington, London.